



Guidance for Outdoor Playgrounds

October 14, 2020

This guidance was developed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) for local use. It will be posted at <http://www.sfcdcp.org/Covid19>. This guidance may change as new knowledge emerges and with changes in community transmission of COVID-19 in San Francisco.

AUDIENCE: Playground visitors and operators of public outdoor playgrounds

PURPOSE: To help playground visitors and operators understand health and safety practices needed to prevent spread of COVID-19.

BACKGROUND: On Sept 28, 2020, the State of California allowed outdoor playgrounds to re-open with certain restrictions. Playgrounds that are allowed to open at this time must be fully outdoors, open to the public, free, operated by a government agency, and intended to serve nearby residents within ½ mile.

San Francisco's Higher Risk

San Francisco also requires additional safety measures due to the higher risk associated with San Francisco's urban setting. Compared to playgrounds in less urban settings:

- San Francisco's playgrounds tend to be smaller and used by more children per square foot during times of heavy use.
- San Francisco has several large playgrounds designed for many more children than a typical neighborhood playground.
- The increased density of children at San Francisco playgrounds and higher number of children at San Francisco's largest playgrounds increase the risk of COVID-19 spread between families.

The following guidance is aligned with CDPH guidance for outdoor playgrounds. It contains clarification of CDPH guidance and additional health and safety measures required by San Francisco.

Key Messages for Playground Visitors

- **Children can and do spread COVID-19 when precautions like face coverings and physical distancing are not followed, even outdoors.** Although young children are less likely to spread COVID-19 than adults, we know that even young children can spread COVID-19, especially when precautions are not observed, even in outdoor settings. Many children with COVID-19 do not have any symptoms and appear well, but can still infect others.
- **Even at playgrounds, people are more likely to be infected with COVID-19 by breathing in respiratory droplets from nearby people than from touching surfaces.** Although COVID-19 can be transmitted through touch, it mainly spreads from person-to-person via tiny respiratory droplets in the air. The risk of droplets spreading through the air is increased by shouting, loud crying, and singing.



Coronavirus cannot infect someone just by touching their skin; it must get into a person's nose, mouth or eyes to cause infection. To get COVID-19 from touching a contaminated surface, a person must first touch the surface, and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth. Frequent handwashing or sanitizing removes the virus from the hands.

Health and Safety Rules for Playground Visitors

1. **Face coverings** over the mouth and nose are required for everyone 2 years of age or older.
2. **Stay at least six feet apart** from children and adults in other households, including
 - Children using or waiting to use play structures or play areas and
 - Families waiting to enter the playground.
 - People outside the playground, including those waiting to enter the playground, must stay at least six feet away from areas of the playground used by children and adults.
 - Do not enter the playground if playground already has the maximum number of children or adults allowed, or if different households cannot stay 6 feet apart.
3. **Actively supervise children**

An adult must actively supervise each child at all times to make sure that children keep their face mask over their nose and mouth and stay at least six feet away from adults and children who are not part of their household.

 - Children who are supervised by the same adult must stay together in the same play area or play structure at all times, to allow active supervision.
 - If an infant or child requires attention (nursing, diapering) that keeps an adult from actively supervising other children on the playground, the adult should ask the other children to leave the play structure/area and stay by the adult's side until needed care is completed.
 - Adults should avoid all non-essential cell phone use in the playground, and keep children by their side until needed cell phone use is completed.
4. **Only 1 adult per child.**

San Francisco allows only one adult to accompany each child into the playground. SFDPH has created this rule to minimize exposure to COVID-19.
5. **Stay home if sick.** Children and adults must not enter the playground if they have symptoms of COVID-19 or are supposed to be staying home because of recent COVID-19 infection or exposure.
6. **No eating or drinking** in the playground, to ensure face coverings are worn at all times.
7. **Wash or sanitize hands** immediately before and after using the playground.
8. **Limit playground visits to 30 minutes** per day when others are present, as required by CDPH.



Special rules for infants and toddlers (under 2 years old)

- Children less than 2 years old should not wear a face covering due to the risk of suffocation. Their hands must be washed if soap and water are available, but they are not required to use hand sanitizer.
- Unmasked infants and toddlers must remain within arm's reach of their caregiver and are not allowed on play structures that can hold more than one child (these structures are generally designed for children age 3 and up). San Francisco requires this to ensure physical distancing of unmasked infants and toddlers at playgrounds.

Who should avoid playgrounds

The following groups are discouraged from using playgrounds when other households are present:

- **Children and adults at higher risk for serious COVID-19**, including older adults. See <https://sfcdcp.org/vulnerable> for a list of vulnerable groups.
- **Children who attend childcare, school, or other programs in-person where children are kept in pods or cohorts.** Allowing children to mix with children outside their pod or cohort increases the risk of the child being infected and spreading infection to their cohort at school, childcare or other programs.
- **Children whose family members have been ill with symptoms of possible COVID-19 but have not been tested or are waiting for test results.** Children with COVID-19 are most often infected by adults in their home. Children with COVID-19 are less likely to have symptoms, but they can still spread the infection to others.

Ways to decrease risk of COVID-19 at playgrounds:

- Go to the playground during days and times when there are fewer people.
- Choose playgrounds within walking distance instead of taking public transportation.
- Choose smaller and less crowded playgrounds over larger playgrounds with more people.
- If your child is crying and cannot be consoled, remove them from the play structure or playground until they are calm. Loud crying can produce a large number of respiratory droplets.

Requirements for public playground operators

Define and post occupancy limits

- Determine the maximum number of children for the playground. Post the maximum number of children for the playground at playground entrances.
- Determine and post the maximum number of adults with six feet of distance from other adults and children at the playground.
- Determine the maximum number of children allowed on each play structure or play area (e.g., climbing structures, slides, swings, spinning structures, and sand areas) with six foot vertical and horizontal distancing. Post the maximum number of children allowed for each play structure/area as close to each play structure/area as feasible.



- San Francisco does not require signs for swings and other playground equipment that are clearly intended for 1 child.
- If a play structure or area can only hold 1 child with physical distancing, occupancy limit may be “1 household” rather than 1 child, to allow children from the same household to use share space.

Mark playgrounds to help children and adults stay six feet apart.

- Mark spaces for families to stand while waiting to enter the playground. The spaces should be far enough apart to allow at least six feet of distance between households.
- Mark designated spaces at least six feet apart for children to stand while waiting to use a play structure/area
- Consider marking play structures or areas with tape or other visual indicators to help children and caregivers assess whether children are at least six feet apart.
- Close play structures as needed for 6-foot distancing (swings, adjacent spinning chairs). Take measures to prevent access to closed play structures.

Monitor and respond to crowding and adherence to health and safety measures

- Develop a written plan to monitor and respond to concerns about health and safety measures at playgrounds, especially consistent face covering use, physical distancing, and overcrowding.
- Post a phone number and email (or webform) for visitors and community members to communicate concerns regarding adherence to health and safety measures at a playground.
- Provide staff who can provide education, outreach and support as needed at playgrounds where significant concerns have been noted. Staff interventions should be based on the needs of each playground, but as examples, staff may:
 - Educate and outreach to families about health and safety rules, especially
 - Face covering use over nose and mouth
 - Physical distancing and maximum occupancy of play areas/play structures
 - Offer face coverings to children and adults
 - Provide hand sanitizer if needed
 - Monitor and limit the number of children on a playground during times of high demand, if needed.
- If resources do not allow all playgrounds to be open or re-open simultaneously, consider prioritizing:
 - Playgrounds in neighborhoods with the greatest number of children, especially neighborhoods where children do not have access to other safe, open space. For example, playgrounds that are “stand-alone” without adjacent open space, or playgrounds where the adjacent open space is unsafe for children.
 - Playgrounds where access can be controlled to help enforce occupancy limits (i.e. the playground is fenced with gates for entrance/exit that can be secured when the playground is not open.



- If significant health and safety concerns persist despite efforts by the playground operator to address these issues, the playground should be closed. Greatest areas of concern would be significant overcrowding, low rates of face mask use, lack of physical distancing, and visits by people with known COVID-19 or exposure to COVID-19.
- If community transmission of COVID-19 in San Francisco increases significantly, the San Francisco Health Officer may require some or all playgrounds in San Francisco to be closed.

Promote hand hygiene

- To the extent feasible, provide handwashing stations or sanitizer to facilitate hand hygiene, especially during times of heavy use.
- San Francisco recommends prioritizing hand hygiene immediately before and after playground use over additional cleaning and disinfection for outdoor playground structures, when resources are limited. See also CDPH guidance for cleaning and disinfection of outdoor playgrounds at the Resource list at the end of this document.

Playground use by childcares, schools, and other programs

Use of playgrounds by programs with cohorts, and the public must be kept separate.

- If there is a pre-scheduled activity that will access the playground, the playground must be closed to the broader public during that time.
- Child care programs, schools, out-of-school time programs and other programs for children and youth where children must remain in cohorts may not use playgrounds during times when they are open to the public. However, if the playground operator permits, the childcare, school or other program may reserve a time for the exclusive use of the playground by the program. SFDPH guidance on keeping cohorts separate must be followed. The playground operator may require the childcare or other program to be responsible for any needed cleaning and disinfection before or after use.
- Playgrounds that are attached to and used by child care programs, community learning hubs, and other programs for children and youth must be closed to the public during hours when these programs are open.

Recommended Signage

- Playground entrances
 - Health and Safety Rules for Visitors
 - Maximum number of children allowed
 - Maximum number of adults allowed
 - Directions on what to do when maximum playground capacity has been reached
 - Phone number and email/webpage for concerns.
 - Consider the following:



- A brief statement of transmission risk. This statement should address common parental misperceptions, and include information that 1) masks and distancing are still required and are important for children when outdoors, and 2) the main COVID-19 risk at playgrounds is through airborne and droplet transmission, and less commonly through touched surfaces,
 - Informing visitors if playground equipment are not regularly cleaned and disinfected.
 - Notifying visitors that the playground may need to be closed if visitors are unable to follow needed health and safety precautions.
- Inside playground
 - Reminders of key playground rules
 - Phone number and email/webform for concerns
 - On or near playground structures or play areas:
 - Maximum number of children allowed in a play structure or area.

Resources

San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH)

- COVID-19 Information and Guidance for the Public
<https://www.sfcddp.org/covid19>

California Department of Public Health (CDPH)

- [Outdoor Playgrounds and other Outdoor Recreational Facilities](#) 9/29/2020
- Playground Flyers (English and Spanish)
<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/Playground-Flyers.aspx>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/visitors.html#playgrounds>